

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 144 067

CS 203 593

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TITLE The Writing Staff as Faculty Compost Pile.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (28th, Kansas City, Missouri, March 31-April 2, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Faculty; *Composition Skills (Literary); English Departments; *English Instruction; Higher Education; *Intercommunication; Learning Processes; *Newsletters; *Staff Meetings

IDENTIFIERS Assumption College MA

ABSTRACT

Misconceptions about the teaching of writing prevail on many college campuses, partially because writing teachers fail to communicate with their colleagues. It is especially important for writing teachers to let their colleagues know that learning to write is a long term developmental process that needs support and reinforcement from the entire faculty. It is also important for English departments to upgrade the status of writing teachers, who have often served as "the comp post pile of college faculties." At Assumption College, the faculty has committed itself to the reinforcement of student writing. A faculty newsletter, "The Comp Post," reports on such topics as writing conferences attended by staff members, approaches to teaching writing, and language usage. Polls of faculty members are conducted periodically to elicit information and opinions on methods used to teach writing. A magazine of student writing samples is also distributed to the faculty. Future plans call for the use of "The Comp Post" as a forum for the consideration of such topics as writing as discovery, sense of audience, and the effect of feedback on writing. In addition, Assumption will sponsor visits by experts in writing and will hold colloquia to preview and review these visits. (GW)

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THE WRITING STAFF AS FACULTY

COMPOST PILE

Angela G. Dorenkamp

The national concern about the teaching of writing has been directed for the most part toward English teachers, yet beside English teachers should stand all educators who conduct academic activities in which students write. Although the necessity for all faculty members to become involved in the support and reinforcement of writing seems obvious, it is generally given short shrift by the public and even by academics themselves.

Part of the reason for this lies in the attitudes toward the teaching of writing prevalent on an inordinate number of college campuses. All users of the language can claim some familiarity with linguistic matters, with oral and written expression, but in spite of this familiarity--or, perhaps, because of it--misconceptions concerning language in general

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and the teaching of writing in particular have become matters of faith in academic folklores.

One of these misconceptions, and the most pervasive, is that anyone can teach writing. This idea is given great credence, especially by those who still believe, even after decades of research which proves otherwise, that the teaching of grammar is synonymous with the teaching of writing. A corollary to this thesis is that the writing teacher deals with form and not content, that he or she will take comma splices and verb agreement errors as subject, while those who teach the "true" disciplines will deal with meaning. A third misconception is that bad writing is the result of bad thinking, that the person who does not write clearly does not think clearly, and vice versa. Even those who admire and use Strunk and White's The Elements of Style subscribe to this notion in spite of the authors' statement: "There is...no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able to write clearly."

This conglomeration of attitudes is often difficult to address, not because it represents a variety of valid positions, but because it involves sometimes contradictory and often limited notions of what language and writing are, much less what the teaching of writing entails. And some of the responsibility for any misunderstanding rests with the teachers of writing themselves, who have failed to communicate--an art

at which they are supposedly adept--with those in other disciplines. This lack of communication often exists between and among the various departments of a college and university, of course, but because writing is a basic component of humane studies, because students write in almost every course and, we hope, for the rest of their lives, teachers of writing have an added and urgent responsibility to communicate what they know to the rest of the faculty.

It is important, for instance, to let our colleagues in on the secret that learning to write and writing to learn are long term developmental processes which need support and reinforcement from all those who teach students. No one expects students to become philosophers after taking one semester of philosophy, yet many expect students to become totally competent writers after one semester of composition. It is not unusual for an English teacher to be told: "This student took composition. How come he writes like this?" Yet we could also ask: "This student took philosophy. How come she can't construct a philosophical inquiry?"

Such recriminations are useless, not only because some students learn more than others, but because the responsibility for requiring clear writing extends to all educators. At a time when there is so much talk about decompartmentalizing disciplines, it is fit and proper to decompartmentalize writing. But in our efforts to do so, we must take the

initiative in communicating to our colleagues not only what we have learned about writing, but what we have learned about teaching.

Such an objective may also require a re-conveiving of Departments of English by their own members. Because English teachers have thought of themselves as teachers of literature, they have often relegated the teaching of writing to T.A.'s and part-timers. It is not that these teachers are less than competent. Quite the contrary. But it is a way of according writing courses a status inferior to that of literature courses, a way of communicating the department's perception of the teacher of writing as a person without portfolio, a professional without a discipline, a man or woman without a country. It is small wonder that college English teachers feel threatened by the recent interest in learning to write: it threatens their status. And it is small wonder that others reflect the same low estimate of the teaching of writing.

Those who teach writing have served as the comp post pile of college faculties. Compost, which is defined as "a mixture of various decaying substances for fertilizing land," combines those two common attitudes: that of most faculty members toward those who teach composition ("a mixture of various decaying organic substances") and that of teachers of writing towards their work ("for fertilizing land"). We need to take up the challenge of the second

part of that definition, to prove not only that writing is an indispensable foundation for holistic education but that our colleagues have a role to perform in building and reinforcing that foundation. In order to do this, we must make overtures, establish connections, provide information, change attitudes, teach.

Our efforts to form and inform the faculty require first of all a channel of communication. Chance meetings in the faculty lounge will not do the job. At Assumption, we began our efforts by starting a faculty newsletter which is, appropriately enough, called The Comp Post. The Comp Post reports to the faculty on the results of the exemption examinations for entering students, on writing conferences attended by staff members, on various approaches to teaching writing, on language in general, on items in divided usage--the distinction between between and among, for instance, or the spelling of catalog. It is usually informative but light, provocative but not obnoxious, jargon-free, unpretentious, and easy to read. Because there is little competition--most of our mail consists of messages from the President and the Dean and minutes of Faculty Senate meetings--The Comp Post has been a more than modest success.

In fact, not only do the majority of faculty members read it, but they sometimes use it in classes. An instructor

in social rehabilitation who used some of the issues to illustrate for his students the impact which language has on people, has written an article on language used to describe the handicapped for our latest issue. Even the postperson has commented on various items in the newsletter and has asked if she could have a copy for a friend. We have also had requests for "subscriptions" from secondary school and college teachers in the area.

The reaction has not been totally positive, of course. One of the early essays on language change caused a few colleagues to express their fear of "declining standards." However, Deus sometimes providebit, and one day when I had occasion to call one of the resisters on another matter, I asked: "Is so and so there?" and he replied: "It's me"--followed by a fervent "Oh, damn!"

We also conduct polls among faculty members at least once a year, not only to elicit information, but to raise writing consciousness. Because at the time that the writing requirement was instituted at Assumption, the faculty as a whole committed itself to the reinforcement of student writing, we asked individual faculty members to describe exactly how they did this and printed excerpts from their responses in The Comp Post. This year, because there was some discussion in the department about teaching the research paper in the composition classes, we polled the

faculty on written assignments and the research paper and also printed those results. Such requests for faculty opinion serve as reminders that although teaching writing is the responsibility of the English Department, the reinforcement of writing skills is the responsibility of the entire faculty.

As a kind of report on the results of our own efforts, we publish a magazine containing samples of the writing done in the Comp classes which is distributed to the faculty. This publication also received positive comment from faculty members, including a note which described it as "sometimes quite moving," and "a powerful demonstration of education as personal development."

But this is actually an interim report. We have spent almost two years in developing an audience of willing listeners, and we are ready to move into areas which will require a deeper and more extensive dialogue. The concepts of composing, of writing as discovery--Burke's pentad, Larson's topics, Young, Becker and Pike's tagmemics--have implications for teaching in all disciplines. During the next academic year, we will describe several invention techniques and the ways in which they can be used creatively to discover provisional-not rigid or final-ideas. The results of the poll on written assignments and the research paper have provided a basis for this kind of inquiry, and we will proceed from that, addressing specifically the assignment of papers and using The Comp Post as our forum. In order

to be effective, we will have to use some invention techniques ourselves in our investigation of invention. In other words, we will raise questions, questions which will help to clarify issues for ourselves as well as for our colleagues.

Some of the questions which might be raised are: What effect does a sense of audience have on writing? For instance when a student does not state some rather basic matters in his paper, is it because he or she is not aware of them or because the student feels that his reader (the teacher) already knows these matters? We want to ask: What is the function of the outline? Which kind of outline? Is the outline a kind of pre-writing exercise or a straitjacket? We want to ask: What are the benefits of revision? Is it more helpful for a writer to have some feedback before he or she completes a final paper? Must we choose between assigning a certain number of papers and assigning fewer re-worked papers? We want to ask the students: What are your perceptions of the research paper? Is your perception expressed by your collections of "pasted together" ideas and quotations? Do you perceive your papers as expressions of your own convictions for which you seek, if not acceptance, at least respect from an audience? Do you perceive them as opportunities for discovery?

We will raise these questions in The Comp Post and in the yearly poll, which will emphasize pre-writing techniques.

At the same time, four colleges in the area are in the process of pooling resources in order to sponsor visits by four experts in writing. The visiting experts will meet with faculty members from all disciplines to talk about invention in particular and writing as "an enabling discipline " in general, the process which enables the student to discover, comprehend and synthesize more in all disciplines. At Assumption, we would like to have our own series of colloquia as previews and reviews of what the visitors have to say.

We are moving in this direction because the understanding and effective use of these techniques, I am firmly convinced, can revitalize teaching, improve the substance of written work, improve analytical and expressive skills, and encourage risking and the use of the imagination. We hope that such a three-pronged effort--articles in print, visiting lecturers, faculty discussions--will be the impetus for the realization of a total faculty commitment to writing. We hope that those who are seeking the same objectives at other institutions will share with us their own strategies and that those who have considered but not yet acted will take this as an exhortation to begin.

If, as Richard Larson says, English teachers "can offer a way of looking at language, a way of making judgments, a way of perceiving structures, a way of conducting inquiries, and a way of imagining and understanding situations that can

help students throughout their academic, not to mention their adult and professional, lives"--if, indeed, English teachers can do that, then we ought to begin sharing and testing these ways with our colleagues. Teachers of writing, after all, are responsible for communicating these concepts and techniques, and more. They are, above all, responsible for fertilizing the land.